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DE RUEHGP #1851/01 2770952
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4166
INFO RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1832
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0085
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SINGAPORE 001851

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/04/2017

TAGS: PHUM PREL BM SN

SUBJECT: BURMA: LEADING ACADEMIC CALLS FOR ASEAN TO SUSPEND BURMA

REF: SINGAPORE 1832

Classified By: CDA Daniel Shields. Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: ASEAN should suspend Burma's membership in the organization, one of Singapore's leading academic and establishment figures argued in an October 4 op-ed piece in the government-linked Straits Times Newspaper. Think tank director and former Ambassador Barry Desker said Burma has been an "albatross around ASEAN's neck for the past decade" and asserted that ASEAN's policy of noninterference was outdated. The Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary Lawrence Wong told the CDA on October 4 that suspending Burma could be considered if the situation gets much worse. MFA Permanent Secretary Peter Ho made a similar statement to CDA on October 2. End Summary.

Comment

¶2. (C) Desker is a senior member of Singapore's tight-knit establishment. His op-ed piece carries weight and the comments by Wong and Ho suggest suspension is an option the GOS would consider if the situation in Burma deteriorates greatly. Desker's op-ed could be a trial balloon to socialize the public to the idea of suspending Burma and indicate where the GOS may feel forced to go if the situation in Burma deteriorates further. Beyond Burma, it also may reflect an attempt by the "older" ASEAN members to reassert their leadership role and push forward with ASEAN integration regardless of the concerns of the "newer" members. End Comment.

Suspend Burma

¶3. (U) ASEAN should suspend Burma's membership in the organization, one of Singapore's leading academic and establishment figures argued in an October 4 op-ed piece in the government-linked Straits Times Newspaper. Ambassador Barry Desker, Director of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and former GOS Ambassador to Indonesia, said the crisis in Burma has made it "imperative that ASEAN move beyond statements to action." Desker's comments followed suggestions in other quarters in ASEAN in recent days that Burma should be suspended. He characterized ASEAN's 1997 decision to admit Burma without any conditionality as a "mistake" and said the regime has been an "albatross around ASEAN's neck for the past decade." While he praised the tough September 27 ASEAN Chair's Statement, he said "ASEAN should now go further" and suspend Burma's membership in ASEAN. He criticized the regime for its many economic and political failings domestically and the fact it doesn't play "an effective role within ASEAN either."

Nonintervention Policy Outdated

¶4. (U) Beyond suggesting a hard line on Burma, Desker went further, arguing that ASEAN's long standing principle of noninterference and nonintervention in the internal affairs of other members was outdated. Desker asserted that the noninterference principle had served its purpose in the early days of the organization. However, "geopolitical realities have changed" and "undermined the logic of the policy of non-intervention and non-interference." With Burma in the organization, ASEAN will "have a credibility problem" when it confronts humanitarian issues elsewhere in the world. As ASEAN moves forward to the establishment of an ASEAN Community, it can not afford to have Burma as a member unless it can live up to its basic commitments to "ensure the well-being of its people." Furthermore, when ASEAN leaders adopt the Charter to give the organization a "legal personality" it has to adopt clear standards of behavior for its members and agree on what it will do when a member "flouts these conventions."

If Things Get Worse

¶5. (C) On the margins of the October 2 meeting with MFA Permanent Secretary Peter Ho reported reftel, the CDA asked Ho about a Straits Times editorial that day that concluded: "if the harsh rule and killings go on without let up, a stage will be reached when the other member nations must ask themselves whether Myanmar's continued membership would damage irreparably ASEAN's standing." Ho said changing the status of Burma in ASEAN is something that would only be considered if the situation got much worse. The issue must

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be addressed unemotionally and strategically, considering whether such a move would actually have the desired impact, Ho said.

¶6. (C) Desker's article reflected a mood, at least in the "older" ASEAN members, that ASEAN should not be caught on the wrong side in Burma (i.e. standing with the regime against the people), the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary Lawrence Wong told the CDA during an October 4 meeting. Wong said Burma could be suspended if the situation gets much worse. He added that a suspension would remove an albatross from the neck of ASEAN and make it easier for ASEAN integration to move forward. However, the "newer" ASEAN members believe such a dramatic step would weaken ASEAN unity and leave them vulnerable in the future. The idea of suspension will have to evolve and will not happen quickly even if it does. Wong predicted that the question of how to deal with Burma will be the center of attention in the run-up to the ASEAN leaders summit in November in Singapore.

Op-Ed Piece

¶7. (U) Begin Text of Desker Op-Ed piece:

October 4, 2007
Suspend Myanmar from Asean
By Barry Desker

Last week's crisis in Myanmar makes it imperative that Asean move beyond statements to action.

The 1997 Asean decision to admit Myanmar under the current military leadership without any conditionality was a mistake. Myanmar took shelter under Asean's wings but there was no commitment by the junta to open up the economy or restore its fledgling democracy. Frankly, Myanmar has been an albatross around Asean's neck for the past decade.

Asean broke new ground on Sept 27 when the Asean foreign

ministers agreed to a statement by the current Asean chair, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo, stating that they were appalled to receive reports of automatic weapons being used to quell the demonstrations in Myanmar and demanded that the Myanmar government immediately desist from the use of violence against demonstrators. They strongly urged Myanmar to seek a political solution and to work towards a peaceful transition to democracy, and called for the release of all political detainees, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Asean ministers recognised that what the junta has done is unacceptable. Asean should now go further. It is time that Myanmar was suspended from the privilege of Asean membership.

As Asean's leaders will be adopting the Asean Charter to give the organisation a legal personality when they meet in Singapore on Nov 18, Asean needs to adopt clear standards of behaviour for its members.

Key provisions of the Charter will call for the promotion of democracy, human rights and obligations, transparency and good governance and strengthening of democratic institutions.

But Asean needs to agree on what it will do if a member blatantly flouts these conventions.

Previously, it had adopted the practice of raising its discomfort with developments in Myanmar privately at meetings with Myanmar leaders and at informal retreats of Asean ministers, where no official records were kept.

Since its founding, Asean's formal position was that every member had the right to lead its existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion. This principle of non-interference and non-intervention in the internal affairs of one another helped each state to develop its own identity in the first years of the grouping's existence.

The primary concern of each member from 1967 was that it should be allowed to forge its own post-colonial identity.

Memories of Indonesia's Konfrontasi policy towards Malaysia and hostility to post-independence Singapore, the bitter Singapore separation from Malaysia, the Philippines' claim to Sabah and Thai fears of spillover from the conflicts in Indochina shaped Asean's handling of domestic developments in the region. An emphasis on developing mutual confidence, understanding the different perspectives of each member and

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creating an awareness of the regional environment and regional sensitivities marked interactions in the early years.

In 1967, Asean leaders were more attuned to the political environment of the former metropolitan countries and needed to become familiar with their neighbours.

This process of developing cohesion and the habit of cooperation received a boost from the challenge posed by the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978. Asean's resolute response to the invasion and ability to build an international coalition opposed to the intervention marked a high point for the policy of non-interference. It meant supporting the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia but it also led to international credibility and recognition for Asean as the only Third World regional grouping able to influence United Nations debates and shape the conflict negotiation process.

In 1967, a policy of non-interference and non-intervention also made sense to the post-colonial regimes in Southeast Asia as they were faced with domestic insurgencies by communist revolutionary movements assisted by China.

As the Asean states sought improved ties with China after the historic Nixon visit to China in 1971, calls for an end to Chinese support for the communist parties in the region were coupled with the need to uphold the principles of non-interference and respect for the sovereignty of the region's states.

Forty years later, geopolitical realities have changed. The end of the Cold War undermined the logic of the policy of non-intervention and non-interference. Doctrines of humanitarian intervention and 'the responsibility to protect' are increasingly the basis of decision-making in the UN Security Council, especially as the impact of bloodshed and the consequences of riots, revolutions and bombings are covered hour by hour on television screens and in widely circulated blogs and on the Internet.

In 1988, the scale of the much larger crackdown by the Myanmar military only became known several weeks later. Today, these images are transmitted instantaneously around the world by mobile phones and YouTube.

As long as Myanmar is part of the highest councils of Asean, the region will have a credibility problem when it seeks to address issues of humanitarian concern elsewhere around the globe.

Not only is the junta a failure when it comes to ensuring Myanmar's economic development, it has also failed to build a cohesive society or ensure a political transition from military rule.

Myanmar does not play an effective role within Asean either. When former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad succeeded in getting Asean approval for Myanmar's admission in 1997, it was believed that Myanmar's participation would lead to learning by example: As Myanmar interacted with Asean states, it would realise that outward-looking policies, increased foreign investment and expanded trade, tourism and other exchanges would lead it to move in the direction of a more open society increasingly integrated with the rest of South-east Asia. These hopes were soon dashed.

As the Singapore co-chair of the Singapore/Myanmar senior officials working group on economic issues, I realised in 1998 that we were going nowhere. As we were preoccupied with the Asian financial and economic crisis, we decided not to proceed with these meetings as our hosts were more interested in taking us on a week-long jaunt to gem mines and tourist attractions than engaging in serious exchanges on policy issues.

As Asean moves towards the establishment of an Asean Community based on the three pillars of a Security Community, a Socio-Cultural Community and an Economic Community, can it afford to have a member seen as having a government that has failed to ensure the well-being of its people not just recently but since it joined Asean?

Old Asean hands will say that Myanmar is part of Asean and should be a member. Yes, but only when Myanmar can uphold its commitments. Until then, the forthcoming Asean Summit should agree on the suspension of Myanmar's membership.

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End Text.

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